

Paving Paradise... How My IYV Initiative Failed

A Commentary and Call to Action

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I have been in the business of volunteering in one capacity or another since April Fool's day, 1980 (and yes there may be a connection there!). In that time I have seen many changes in volunteering, volunteerism, the non-profit sector, nonprofit organizations, and the world around us. I don't mean to sound like I have seen everything or know everything about volunteering even though I have enough grey hair to just possibly get away with such a claim. The one observation I can offer with the clarity and confidence borne of endless repetition is this: nonprofit organizations, senior administrators in agencies and other entities such as government programs and departments, funders, and boards of directors still remain relatively ignorant of the importance of volunteerism. Many organizations (boards and executive staff) are still woefully unaware of what their own volunteers actually do, and in a directly related way, have little to no idea of what an organization must do to ensure volunteer program success. Sure there are exceptions and most of us can identify one or two. But they are the exceptions. The pattern is nonetheless clear.

Herein lie the principal puzzles of my working life.

- How can volunteers and volunteering be so central to community life as we know it in the United States, in Canada, in the United Kingdom, and beyond, and still be as misunderstood and fraught with decades-old stereotypes?
- How can funders pressure organizations to increase volunteer involvement in program delivery and at the same time declare volunteer program management costs ineligible for core funding?
- How can boards approve the development of new services which will in large part be supported by volunteer involvement and time after time in agency after agency fail to provide a budget for the stimulation and coordination that very volunteer effort?
- How can it be that we still have not in a widespread way figured out that volunteering is cost-effective but not free?

- How can organizations who are asking volunteers to take on evermore responsible and sophisticated work, simultaneously cut the volunteer program budget.

I base these observations and questions on a more than twenty-year career that has allowed me the good fortune of connecting with thousands of managers of volunteer programs every year. I hear time and time again the same message from the managers of volunteer programs who participate in my workshops:

- I know we need to enhance our program management systems
- I know we need to screen volunteers in positions of trust more thoroughly
- I know we shouldn't recruit one more volunteer until we are sure we are properly supporting the volunteers we already have in place

... but my supervisor, my executive director, my board, our funders keep pressing for more and more and they don't understand what it takes to make all of this happen.

How many volunteers can we expect one manager of volunteer to manage? How far can a volunteer program be expanded without additional resources? It is a game: let's see how far a manager of volunteers can be stretched before s/he "snaps"? How can we keep putting volunteers into risky situations without the necessary training and supervision they need to do their work safely?

It's not the managers of volunteers who need to hear these messages. It is nonprofit organizations. It is boards and senior administrators. That's who we need to be advocating with.

Individual managers of volunteers cannot do it in isolation, organization by organization. That should be abundantly clear to us after at least two decades of concerted effort to influence organizational understanding and appreciation.

So how do we illustrate, demonstrate, drive home the importance of volunteers and volunteering? How do we gain recognition for the occupation of volunteer program management? How do we educate politicians, public policy makers, funders, and agency leaders about the blinding obvious need to properly resource voluntary action?

I believe the answer lurks in the lyrics to Joni Mitchell's 1970 hit song, Big Yellow Taxi:

Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone.
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot.

Over many years of anguish over the absence of progress, I have come to believe that the only way volunteerism will ever be understood is for it to be withdrawn, if only for a relative instant. I am convinced, as Mitchell suggests, that we will not see any deep understanding of the value of volunteering until its absence is experienced.

So my personal commitment in the run up to the International Year of Volunteers was to try to talk some community, somewhere - anywhere, really - into organizing a volunteer strike. I pushed hard in Winnipeg, Canada because Winnipeg has an important history with strikes, having been the site of the 1919 General Strike in which the almost unanimous participation of working men and women closed the city's factories, crippled its retail trade and stopped the trains. Even public sector employees such as policemen, firemen, postal workers, telephone operators and employees of waterworks and other utilities joined the strike in an impressive display of solidarity (Natalia Beszterda, no date). I was passionate in my appeal to MAVA (the Manitoba Association of Volunteer Administrators) to take the lead in organizing a strike of all volunteers in Winnipeg as their IYV project, but to no avail! I've made the plea in a multitude of other communities across Canada, the United States, and even in the United Kingdom. Similarly to no avail. Managers of volunteers nod their heads and say, "Gee, ya, that might do it" but nobody rises to the call.

The recent withdrawal of all volunteers from Toronto hospitals in response to the SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) has raised the issue once again in my mind. The expulsion of volunteers emulated mini-volunteer-work-withdrawals. The impact was enormous. Suzanne Lawson talks a bit about the crisis in her article “The Day All The Volunteers Left” (this volume), but we need to hear more from the managers of volunteers in Toronto hospitals about what learnings were gleaned by hospital staff, administrators, and the wider community of health care consumers when volunteers were removed from the scene. I anxiously wait to hear the stories and yearn for fodder to make a political statement! Tell us more. Write it up. Share it widely. Use it to make change happen.

Here are some other suggestions:

- Organizations that are invested in the promotion of volunteerism (e.g., Volunteer Canada, the Points of Light Foundation, the International Association for Volunteer Effort, volunteer centres everywhere) could redirect their energies away from the promotion of best practices and professional development in volunteer program management. Leave that work to the professional organizations such as AVA, and the state/provincial and

local associations of managers of volunteers. Just imagine what could be accomplished if all of the lead organizations, worldwide, collectively committed - even for one year - to the education and lobbying of nonprofit boards, funders, governments, politicians, and executive directors.

- Imagine what we might accomplish if all consultants in volunteer management committed for a year to cultivate speaking engagements and training opportunities, not to managers of volunteers, but to those managers of volunteers’ supervisors and executive directors.

- Consider the impact if the writers in the fields of volunteering and volunteer program management committed to the production of a full year of articles, not about volunteer program management, but about the importance of volunteering and the organizational need to support the infrastructure of volunteering. What learning could be generated if those authors submitted those articles to all of the journals and newsletters and websites of all of the voluntary sector organizations they could think of?

- What impact might be generated by the hundreds of voluntary sector researchers if they

collectively concentrated on how to stimulate a sector-wide consciousness raising about the indispensability of volunteering to the health and functioning of the nonprofit sector.

- Imagine if we all seized every opportunity we could find or make to educate about volunteering, its importance to civil society, to democracy, to quality of life, to human service, to our children, our grandparents, our communities ... and what volunteering needs to be healthy, vibrant and rise to the challenges it is sure to face over the next decade.
- Imagine the impact if we - somebody - would organize a strike of volunteers, if only for a relative moment. For a day or a week. Yes, some people would go without service. But think of how many people are being denied safe, quality programming right now because volunteer program managers do not have the resources they genuinely need to support effective volunteer involvement; because governments, corporations, funders, politicians have not allocated sufficient funds to support effective voluntary action.

While we wait for the strike to get organized, check out these efforts at stimulating awareness about, and support for, volunteering:

The launch by the European Volunteer Centre of the Volunteering Manifesto in Europe 2003, a document which outlines the importance of volunteering and ways to advance it:

<http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/browse/countries/belgium/doc/europe-launches-volunteering-manifesto.html>

The Development of Volunteering and Social Capital: a paper for the Symposium on Volunteering and Social Capital by Liz Burns, President of the International Association for Volunteer Effort (IAVE) in which she explores “the strong links between volunteering and social capital and their importance for sustainable communities and for the future of democracy itself.”: <http://www.iadb.org/ETICA/sp4321-i/DocHit-i.cfm?DocIndex=751>.

The Canadian Code for Volunteer Involvement and its companion resource book downloadable from Volunteer Canada's website:

<http://volunteer.ca/volunteer/pdf/CodeEng.pdf>

Let's stop whining about the fact that we are not understood, or appreciated, or resourced. Let's as a movement, actually do something about it! Go on. Roll up your sleeves. Sharpen your elbows. Be rebellious! Be outrageous! Be strategic. Make change happen!

References

Beszterda, Natalia. The Winnipeg General Strike. Retrieved July 7, 2003 from:

<http://198.169.128.1/business/cupe1975/burs4.html>

Big Yellow Taxi. From Ladies of the Canyon album, 1970, by Joni Mitchell. Original lyrics © 1966-69 Siquomb Publishing Co. BMI

Burns, Liz. The Development of Volunteering and Social Capital: a paper for the Symposium on Volunteering and Social Capital. Santiago, Chile. May, 2003. Retrieved July 7, 2003 from:

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